DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 247 SO 026 716

AUTHOR Wright, Norma D.
TITLE From Risk to Resiliency: The Role of Law-Related Education.
INSTITUTION Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, CA.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 19p.
AVAILABLE FROM Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizenship Education; Communication Skills; Critical Thinking; *Delinquency Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; Empathy; *Law Related Education; *Problem Solving; Self Esteem; Social Studies; *Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to identify and explore those characteristics of at-risk youth who have succeeded in overcoming adverse environmental conditions and to focus on the role of law-related education (LRE) in promoting the development of those characteristics that lead to healthy behavior. At-risk youth are defined as those who have been subject to a combination of interrelated biological, psychological, and social factors that result in a greater likelihood for the development of delinquency, substance abuse, or other anti-social and self-destructive behaviors. Resiliency is the ability to overcome successfully the effects of a high-risk environment. Resilient children are identified as demonstrating: (1) social competence, including care for others and good communication skills; (2) problem solving and critical thinking skills; and (3) a sense of autonomy. While LRE is not a panacea for the complex problems facing youth-at-risk, the three factors identified as critical to resiliency are explicit objectives of LRE curriculums. LRE can foster resilience to risk factors among students. (LH)

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ED 402 247

FROM RISK TO RESILIENCY: THE ROLE OF LAW-RELATED EDUCATION

NORMA D. WRIGHT
Senior Consultant

SO 026 716

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Center for Civic Education
5146 Douglas Fir Road
Calabasas, CA 91302
(818) 591-9321 • (818) 591-9330 fax
e-mail: center4civ@aol.com

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FROM RISK TO RESILIENCY: THE ROLE OF LAW-RELATED EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Many factors, both individual and environmental, contribute to the increasing incidence of youth crime, violence, and other anti-social behaviors. Although the problem is staggering and there are complex factors that must be systematically, comprehensively, and collaboratively addressed by families, schools, and communities, there is overwhelming evidence that delinquency and violence among our nation's youth are neither uncontrollable nor inevitable. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first to identify and explore those characteristics of the young people who have successfully overcome adverse environmental conditions, and secondly, to focus on the role of law-related education (LRE) in promoting the development of those characteristics that lead to healthy behavior.

Law-related education is an educational program for citizenship in a constitutional democracy. It is designed to teach students the fundamental principles and skills needed to become responsible participants. Programs are characterized by relevant, high interest course materials; extensive use of volunteer resource persons from the justice system; field experiences (community service projects, court tours, police ride-alongs, internships, etc.); participatory classroom teaching methods and co-curricular activities (mock trials and other public performances).

WHAT IS *AT-RISK*

Youth-at-risk has become a quintessential buzz word. You can pick up any educational publication and find a different definition. The lack of clarity is reminiscent of the time Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was asked to define *obscenity*. He replied, "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it." In much the same way, we all know who the youth-at-risk are. They are the young people who fall through the cracks—unless we provide safety nets. They are not necessarily overtly aggressive, stereotypical juvenile delinquents. They are also the quiet, withdrawn, passive kids. Nor are they limited to one geographical area or socio-economic or ethnic group. They are present in every classroom in every school.

For the purposes of this paper, *at-risk youth* are those who have been subject to a combination of interrelated biological, psychological, and social factors that result in a greater likelihood for the development of delinquency, substance abuse, or other related anti-social and self-destructive behaviors.

RISK FACTOR RESEARCH

The premise of risk-focused prevention programs is that to prevent behavior before it happens, we must know what factors increase the risks of that behavior and we must address and reduce those factors. The factors which place young people at-risk are numerous, interrelated, and overlapping with little evidence to support a hierarchy. David Hawkins, researcher at the University of Washington, has identified ten factors about which the research is clear and consistent and with which most educators are familiar:

- alienation and lack of bonding to family, school, and community
- early, frequent anti-social behavior
- family history of high-risk behavior
- poor family management practices
- family conflict
- economic and social deprivation
- school failure
- low commitment to education
- association with delinquent peers
- community disorganization (includes little attachment to neighborhood, high crime, low surveillance, availability of drugs and alcohol—distinct from income levels)

The presence of the above risk factors does not guarantee that a young person will engage in delinquency, substance abuse, or other anti-social behavior. These factors, however, do represent an increased probability that such behavior will occur. The more risk factors present, the higher the risk. It is also important to note that many risk factors are correlative, not predictive. For example, children of alcoholics are more likely to become alcoholics than children of non-alcoholic parents, but most children of alcoholics do not become alcoholic.

RESILIENCY RESEARCH

Although risk factor research and theories have contributed significantly to our understanding of prevention and intervention, they do not explain why most children manage to bounce back and overcome even the most adverse circumstances. Indeed, it would be hard to find any adolescent who has not experienced at least some risk factors at some time in his or her life, yet most young people do not engage in delinquency or other anti-social and self-destructive behavior. These young people appear to be resilient. Resiliency is the ability to successfully overcome the effects of a high-risk environment and to develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress. What characteristics make this possible, and how can schools create environments that support these children?

Dr. Tim Buzzell, Director of the Iowa Center for Law and Civic Education, has noted that the research findings on both risk and resiliency include a number of psychological characteristics. For example, risk factors such as alienation, school failure, or poor interpersonal relationships incorporate a number of characteristics associated with the processes of cognition. The resiliency framework focuses more specifically on psychological traits such as problem solving skills, social competence, and a sense of autonomy. (Buzzell, 1992)

As Dr. Buzzell points out, the research on cognition and resiliency also is consistent with findings from evaluations of corrections programs. An important challenge to the prevailing belief that "nothing works" in rehabilitating youthful offenders is the work of Robert Ross and his colleagues at the University of Ottawa. After a careful review of studies published between 1973 and 1987, Ross found that ***some*** programs were highly successful and that the common characteristic of every successful program was the inclusion of some technique which could be expected to have an impact on the offender's ***thinking***. "They included some technique which could increase his reasoning skills, teach him to stop and think before acting, increase his problem solving skills, help him to develop alternative interpretations of social rules and obligations, and help him to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of other people." (Ross, 1990)

Based on her review of the literature, Bonnie Benard, Prevention Specialist for the Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities at Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, has identified the following characteristics of resilient children: (Benard, 1993)

- social competence
  - responsiveness to others
  - conceptual and intellectual flexibility
  - caring for others
  - good communication skills
  - sense of humor
- problem solving skills
  - ability to apply abstract thinking (understanding rules and laws)
  - engage in reflective thought
  - critical reasoning skills
  - develop alternative solutions in frustrating situations (calculate consequences of actions, cause and effect)

- sense of autonomy
  - positive sense of independence
  - emerging feelings of efficacy
  - high self-esteem
  - impulse control
  - planning and goal setting
  - belief in future (things will work out and a sense that they understand why things happen as they do)

These are characteristics which can be influenced positively to help young people resist anti-social influences. The development of these characteristics can serve as worthwhile goals of prevention and intervention efforts.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors are those conditions or influences which ameliorate the risk factors and promote the characteristics of resiliency. They are not merely the opposite of risk factors. Rather, they represent a separate group of factors, defined independently of risk-factor research. In *The Invulnerable Child*, E. J. Anthony uses the following often quoted analogy to clarify the terms, risk, resilience, and protective factors:

> *...three dolls made of glass, plastic, and steel and exposed to the same risk, the blow of a hammer. The first doll breaks down completely, the second shows a dent that it carries permanently, and the third doll gives out a fine metallic sound. Of course, the outcomes for the three dolls would be different if their environments were to buffer the blows from the hammer by interposing some type of 'umbrella' between the external attack and the recipient.* (1987 pp. 10-11)

In this analogy, the steel doll is resilient, the glass and plastic dolls represent degrees of vulnerability and the buffer or umbrella represents the protective factors. "The range of human development outcomes is determined by the balance between risk factors, stressful life events and transitions, and protective factors." (Werner, 1982) Families, schools and communities that protect children growing up in adverse conditions are characterized by (1) caring and support, (2) positive expectations, and (3) ongoing opportunities for participation. (Benard, 1993) Given the incredible stresses many families are experiencing, school has become a vital refuge for a growing number of children, serving as a "protective shield to help children withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect of a stressful world." (Garmezy, 1991)

THE ROLE OF LAW-RELATED EDUCATION AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR

Law-related education is not a panacea for the complex problems that often begin within the family and are exacerbated by the social conditions in which some children are raised. Content and strategies of LRE, however, are especially well suited to ameliorating the effects of those factors.

David Hawkins' social development strategy organizes existing evidence on protective factors into a theory for addressing risk factors and promoting resiliency. This theory identifies bonding—the feeling of being connected to others—as the overarching protective factor in the development of healthy behaviors. We can do little or nothing to change some individual characteristics that serve as protective buffers in the lives of some children. Some, like gender, shyness or sociability have a biological base. These are the characteristics an individual brings into the world and cannot be easily changed. In contrast, bonding is a protective factor that can be changed.

From early on, resilient children tend to establish positive relationships with both adults and peers that help bond them to their family, school and community. (Benard, 1993) LRE's emphasis on the use of outside resource persons provides those opportunities for bonding to adult role models both inside the classroom and out. The small heterogeneous cooperative-learning groups inherent in LRE instruction not only provide opportunities for at-risk students to interact and bond with non-delinquent peers, but increase the chance that they will ask for and accept the support of others.

Bonding encompasses the quantity and quality of the relationships we establish with others. In reference to school-based violence prevention programs, Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Assistant Dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, stresses the importance of the fourth R—relationships. (Prothrow-Stith, 1993) A recent study conducted by the Institute for Education in Transformation at the Claremont Graduate School collected and analyzed 24,000 pages of data from interviews with students, staff, and parents at four representative urban/suburban public elementary and high schools about the problems in schooling. An executive summary of their findings, "Voices from the Inside: A Report on Schooling from Inside the Classroom," noted that the problem most often mentioned was relationships between teachers and students. Where positive things about the schools were noted, they usually involved reports of "individuals who care, listen, understand, respect others and are honest, open and sensitive." LRE teacher training programs stress the development of these attitudes among students as well as in teachers, and encourage educators to value the contributions of ***all*** students and to be involved as a learner ***with*** their students.

No discussion of protective factors would be complete without some discussion of cultural status both as a risk factor and a potential protective factor. Institutional racism still exists, denying members of certain ethnic groups equal access to the rewards of our political, economic, and educational institutions. These inequities can lead to feelings of powerlessness, alienation and anger. (Cummins, 1986) "Some ethnic communities are devalued and disempowered by the larger society in much the same way as are their individual members. With some justification, these communities often distrust the dominant culture, further isolating them from whatever opportunities and resources might be available to them." (*A Place to Start*, Santa Clara County Office of Education, 1990)

Young people from language and cultural minorities are disproportionately represented among youth-at-risk. However, most minority youth who grow up with the stresses of poverty, lack of opportunity, discrimination, community breakdown, and family disruption *do not engage in crime and violence.* (American Psychological Association, 1993) Cultural values of minority groups can serve to enhance resilience. In contrast to the value placed on individuality by the dominant culture, the African-American emphasis on communitarianism, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Island American emphasis on family harmony, and the Native American value of cooperation within the group are more closely aligned with positive protective strategies. Along with the social competence skills of empathy and caring for others noted above, LRE curriculums and strategies incorporate increased understanding of and respect for cultural diversity and values through lessons such as those on the constitutional protection of minority rights.

Hawkins outlines three conditions necessary for the development of strong bonds: opportunities, skills, and recognition. Using Hawkins' model, LRE's role in promoting these conditions can be demonstrated.

Opportunities. Children must be provided with opportunities to contribute to their family, their school, their community. The task is to provide children with meaningful, challenging, developmentally appropriate opportunities that help them feel responsible and significant. (Hawkins, 1992) Hawkins and other researchers have demonstrated that instructional methods emphasizing proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning improved bonding to school and reduced misbehavior. (Hawkins, et al, 1988)

Law-related education's heavy emphasis on interactive and cooperative-learning strategies provide an opportunity for ***all*** students to participate and to receive recognition for their contributions to the group. LRE content prepares students for school and community participation by providing an understanding of how the system works and opportunities for students to explore alternative forms of influencing social conditions. The relevance and

authenticity of many LRE lessons has been demonstrated to engage student interest and willingness to participate. Several LRE curriculums are explicitly designed to promote community service and to engage students in solving real problems in their school or community.

Skills. Opportunities for involvement will be of little value if students lack the skills that will enable them to participate. If children do not have the skills necessary to be successful, they experience frustration and failure and will not want to participate.

The resiliency factors identified by Ross, Benard, and others (problem-solving, social competence and autonomy) are explicit objectives of LRE lessons and curriculums. Participation in mock trials, legislative hearings, and other LRE role-plays and simulations enhances communication skills. Debates, moot courts, case studies, and conflict resolution activities help students to see issues from multi-perspectives, to tolerate ambiguities, to identify alternative solutions to problems, and to assess the consequences of various alternatives. Practice in such activities strengthens the ability to think abstractly, reflectively, critically, and flexibly which in turn may increase impulse control—the likelihood that students enrolled in LRE classes will think before acting. Practice in handling controversial issues with respect for differing views reinforces feelings of empathy and caring. Several LRE curriculums focus on the development of student plans to address relevant school and community issues, thereby providing practice in the planning skills which are among the attributes of resilient children. LRE's interactive and cooperative group strategies offer ongoing opportunities for practice of the social participation skills essential to resiliency.

Recognition. Families, teachers, and members of the community who acknowledge the legitimacy and value of youth participation reinforce important messages about efficacy and personal empowerment. Children must be recognized and acknowledged for their efforts. Recognition gives children the incentive to continue to contribute. Teachers who reinforce students' progress and parents who recognize their children's efforts contribute to bonding. (Hawkins, 1992)

Good LRE instruction is based on the life experiences of students. This practice not only makes the lessons more relevant to the lives of students, but more importantly, recognizes the value of their experience. LRE also asks students to reflect on, recognize, and value what they have learned from each lesson or activity. The use of outside resource persons in LRE also sends an important message to students that people in their community care about them and are willing to take the time to listen to their ideas.

CONCLUSION

The Commission on Violence and Youth of the American Psychological Association recently cited primary prevention programs that promote social and cognitive skills as having the greatest impact on attitudes about violent behavior. (American Psychological Association, 1993) The Commission's report also concluded that effective intervention programs shared two primary characteristics: they draw on the understanding of developmental and socio-cultural risk factors leading to antisocial behavior and, they use theory-based intervention strategies with known efficacy in changing behavior. LRE meets both criteria.

There is no quick fix, no magic wand to solve the problems that face young people in our society. But it can be done. It will require time, patience, and resources and the concerted efforts of families, schools, and communities to change beliefs, attitudes, practices, and social conditions. Law-related education ***clearly*** can play an important role in that effort by fostering resilience to risk factors among the students in our classrooms and communities.

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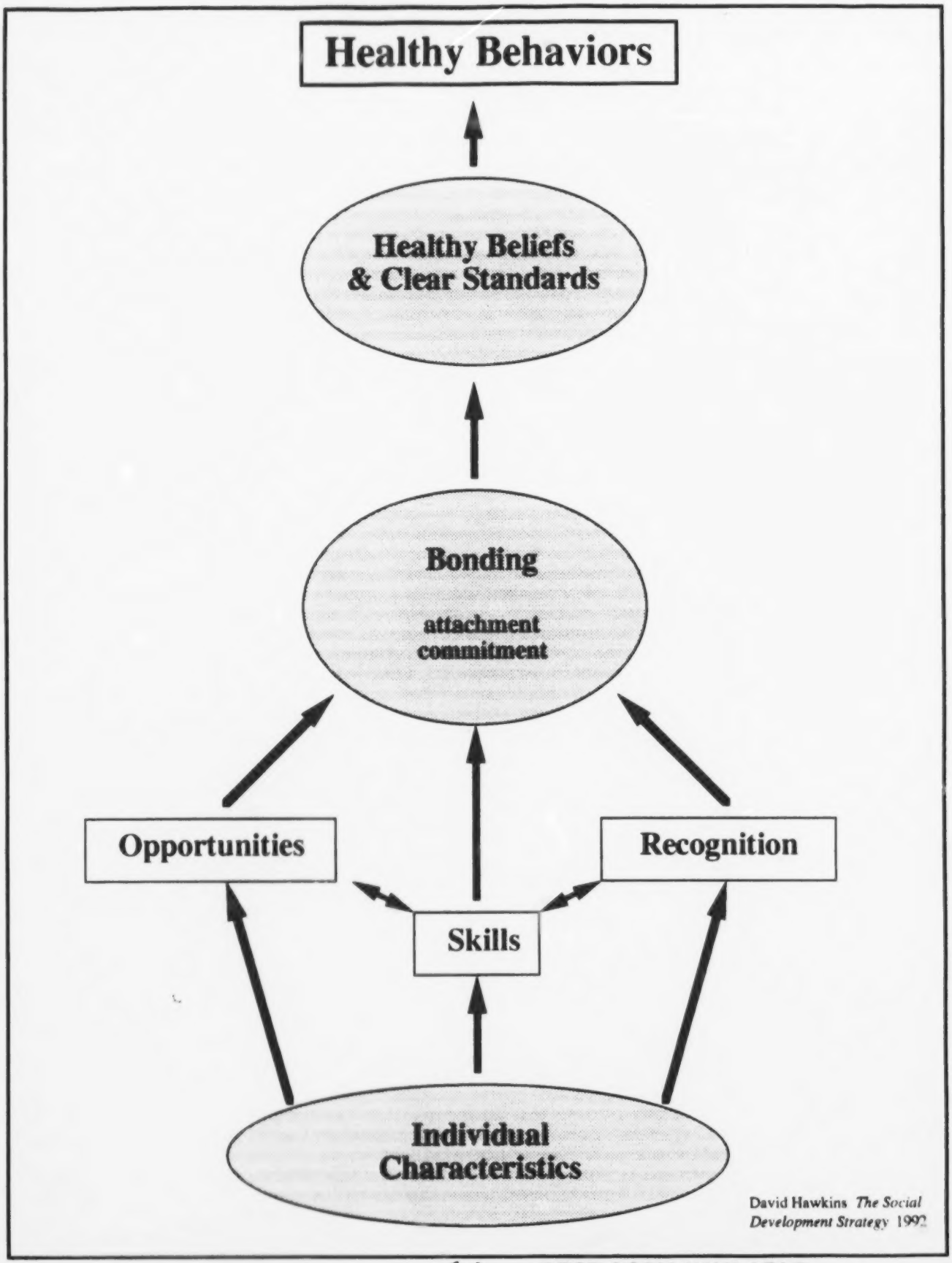

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RISK FACTORS

Community Risk Factors

- availability of drugs
- availability of firearms
- community norms favoring drug use, firearms and crime
- media portrayals of violence
- transitions and mobility
- low levels of attachment to neighborhood
- community disorganization
- economics and social deprivation

Family Risk Factors

- family history of drug abuse, crime and violence
- poor family management practices
- family conflict
- favorable parental attitudes toward drugs, crime and violence

School-Related Risk Factors

- early and persistent anti-social behavior
- academic failure
- lack of commitment to school

Individual and Peer Group Risk Factors

- alienation and rebelliousness
- friends who engage in the problem behaviors
- early initiation of problem behaviors
- constitutional factors (including sensation seeking, risk-taking and lack of impulse control)

RESILIENT YOUTH

Can do these things

- Communicate effectively
- Empathize with others
- Think abstractly/reflectively/flexibly
- Identify alternative solutions to problems
- Assess consequences
- Control impulses (think before acting)
- Laugh at self and situations

Believe

- I am worthy
- I am the master of my fate
- I can handle it
- I am not alone
- I make a difference in the world
- I can figure out solutions to my problems

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Strong bonds to family, school, and community

- caring
- attachment
- support
- commitment

Opportunities for meaningful involvement in

- family
- school
- community

Skills

- social competence
  - communication
  - perspective taking
- problem-solving
  - critical reasoning
  - abstract & reflexive thinking

Recognition

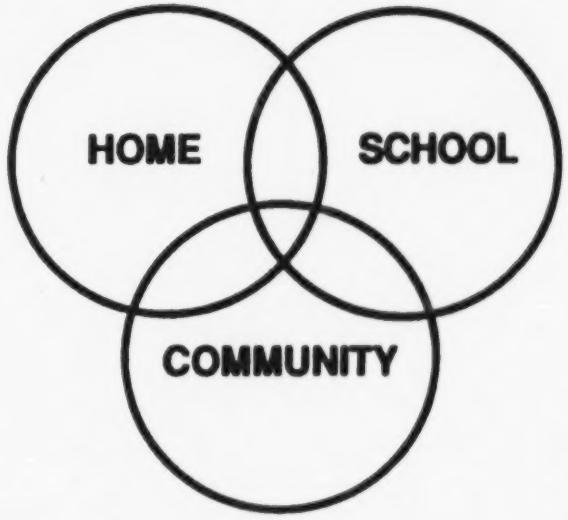
- consistent, clear expectations
- rewards and incentives for positive contributions

THERE IS NO QUICK FIX FOR YOUTH-AT-RISK

Time

Patience

Resources



Beliefs

Attitudes

Practices